HISTORY

Ghost town almost was home for Wolverines

Wabash Railroad bypassed Rawsonville to erect station in Belleville

By William Zilke
Courier Correspondent

When one thinks of ghost towns it's easy to conjure up tumblin' tumbleweeds and sun bleached cow skulls. But one doesn't have to venture all the way to New Mexico to find towns that time has forgotten.

If you drive slowly enough down Rawsonville Road, you'll notice the state of Michigan historical marker outside of the McDonald's Restaurant marking the former site of the village of Rawsonville.

Rawsonville was originally known as Snow's Landing, named after one of the first pioneers to settle in the area and build a saw mill on the banks of the Huron River. Flat-bottomed boats ran the river between Snow's Landing and Lake Erie, carrying up to 20 tons of freight. The river was a far more viable route than the roads leading out of Detroit which were still mud ruts at best in the early years of the 19th century.

The first quarter of that century also saw Amariah Rawson, a veteran of the War of 1812, move into the small village. Rawson bought 160 acres on the south bank of the Huron River. He built the second saw mill and the first dam to cross the river in this area. In 1836, he, Abraham Voorhies and Matthew Woods filed a plat of the village and formally changed the name from Snow's Landing to Michigan City. In 1839, due to petitions filed by his neighbors the town's name was changed to Rawsonville. Both Rawson's property and the village sprawled across Michigan Street, later Rawsonville Road, the boundary line for Wayne and Washtenaw counties.

The business community and population of Rawsonville reached its peak around the time of the Civil War. At this time the village boasted a saw mill, grist mill, two cooper shops, stove, cheese and stay factories, three blacksmiths, a distillery, drygoods and general stores, a wagon maker and a carriage maker and three saloons. Up to 1,000 people lived in 400 homes in the small community.

During this period of time Rawsonville was larger than either Ypsilanti or Ann Arbor and had bid to have the University of Michigan located there. But like many ghost towns that once thrived and prospered Rawsonville was soon to be given a death sentence by a mere twist of fate.

In 1836, the Monroe and Ypsilanti Railroad Company secured a charter to run a railroad line in Monroe, near the entrance of Lake Erie, to Ypsilanti through Rawsonville. Direct rail transportation would have been the financial catalyst the village needed to become the largest city in the area. But the line never materialized.

The beginning of the end of Rawsonville came in July, 1881 when the Wabash Railroad ran its train line three miles south of Rawsonville and a depot was erected in Belleville. Local businesses and farmers gravitated with their goods to the rail line.

Within a decade, businesses and residents left. Vacant homes were reported slipping down the hillsides and the dam itself finally broke, leaving the Huron River a muddy stream in the Rawsonville area.

Detroit Edison built a dam at the opposite end of the township in 1926, creating Belleville Lake and raising the water levels in the area. Another was built at Edison Point near the current location of Van Buren Park and the Ford Motor Company was scheduled to erect one above Rawsonville. Much of old Rawsonville now lay underwater. Swimmers would become snagged in old barbed wire laying just under the water's surface. Drownings were not uncommon.

Photo by William Zilke

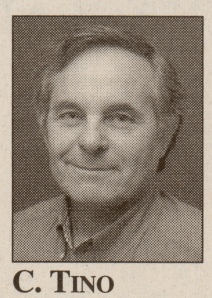
Part of the ghost town of Rawsonville lies beneath the water near Van Buren Park. When the dam at French Landing was constructed, it created Belleville Lake and flooded the abandoned village.

The building of the lake also created a building boom since Rawsonville was now prime lakefront property. However, the Great Depression effectively put the final nail in Rawsonville's coffin. In 1877 the business directory revealed a healthy, thriving climate. In 1930 not a single business remained.

In 1962, Rawsonville Road was widened, resulting in the razing of many of Rawsonville's old homes. Today, the area where Rawsonville once stood is governed by Van Buren Township in Wayne County and Ypsilanti Township in Washtenaw County. Only the historical marker on a fast food restaurant's front lawn marks the spot where a century and a half ago, 1,000 people lived and prospered.

THOUGHTS AT LARGE

Lambros tackles 'Brave' issues



C. TINO LAMBROS

Once again the school mascot issue raises its ugly head locally. The community puts it to rest and lo and behold here it comes again. Schools and communities deal with major problems and issues of finances, safety, the economy, roads and others. Some do good citizens' group or organization derails the serious agenda to look at the dreaded "mascot/logo" issue. Ypsilanti Schools has formed a committee to look into the mighty Brave. I, as a proud Brave alumnus, volunteer to serve on this prestigious committee.

Outsiders enter the fray with their proposals. They expound on how negative, how degrading, how awful these mascots are to the Native Americans. These proponents know little of our community, culture, or heritage. Yet they disrupt our life and our local institutions with their rhetoric. And... we let them. We form committees, study, investigate, and jump through hoops. We spend countless hours. Then we make a decision.

The Ypsilanti community and Eastern Michigan University never completely resolved the change from Hurons to Eagles. It is still a divisive issue. It's not that this is such a sacred cow, but there are loyalties and strong feelings. And yet one of the main spokespersons for ridding EMU of the Huron was allegedly not an Indian as he claimed and was allegedly imprisoned for unmentionable indiscretions.

With important issues in the educational arena, taking valuable time and talent to deal with logos is ludicrous. Every school district has financial problems, contract issues, enrollment concerns along with class sizes and classroom materials. There are Federal and State guidelines to follow. The mascot becomes relatively minor. How much did it cost EMU to switch from the Huron to the Eagle? Signage! Paper work! Staff time! Athletic uniforms and equipment! Educational materials! Souvenirs! EMU vehicles! Alumni support and donations! Community resistance! Who knows for sure . And now, if the Ypsi Schools proceed and change, what will be the cost be to all of us?

A popular area columnist wrote that a school mascot and logo should represent its community. On first reading this makes sense. However there are few schools and colleges that come close to this. Unless he was speaking tongue in cheek and not foot in mouth, this makes little sense.

Take a look around us and see how this works. The only true locally correct mascot may be the Huron River Rats. If there are rats, read this to be Huron River – Rats. However if you read this to be Huron – River Rats, then, like EMU, one is degrading the Huron Native American. Are there more Hurons in the area than eagles or rats?

An argument may be made for the Willow Run Flyers, since there is still a busy Willow Run Airport. The Flyers originated during World War II when the bomber plant at Willow Run turned out more bombers that any other plant in the nation. There were lots of pilots here to fly them out. The meaning has evolved, but still may work.

How many Tigers are there in Belleville? I don't think there's been a Dreadnaught seen in Dexter or a Flying Dutchman in Manchester. Saline may have more than its share of Hornets and Chelsea its Bulldogs. If there are any Gryphons in the area I hope they stay at Greenhills. There are thousands of Rocks in Plymouth, although historically this refers to the Pilgrims. Rocks may now be a verb and not a noun. This eliminates a logo/mascot.

A school mascot representative of its community is, in itself, interesting. Communities are ever changing and evolving. What may be representative today may not be in the future. In Ypsi the famed Water Tower has been the most constant, most recognizable Ypsi tradition. Any mascot/logo suggestions here? Milan has the prison. How's the Milan Inmates? In Saline the salt springs and baths are no longer in use. We can't call them the Saltines.

I look at the Ypsi Brave and the logos of Milan and Clinton. I don't see a stark, raving mad savage out to massacre the white man. I see the face of a strong, brave, proud, intelligent man. I don't recall seeing the Native American demeaned in any public display at a school event.

Being of Greek ancestry, I cannot feel what Native Americans and others who feel persecuted by mascots and logos may feel. I can only suggest that there is no malice intended. Wait a minute... Maybe I can... By golly this is awful... I do know what it is all about... A couple of decades ago I traveled to Greece. One of our visits was to a beautiful village in Peloponnesia, A quiet, serene, friendly, little spot called Sparta. At one end of the town square was a massive, regal, and proud statue of Leonides I. He was a warrior, a soldier. Undermanned, he fought for the safety of his village on the plains of Thermopylae. A proud and heroic King of Sparta. Revered and honored in his village – even now after many centuries... Just what has Michigan State done to this noble man? How can they demean this icon of Greek history with that mocking and disgusting logo and mascot? That savage and mocking image of "Sparty's" head that is pranced around like a spoils of war. How evil is it to change his name. His name wasn't Sparty. It IS Leonides I. Sons of Pericles! Daughters of Penelope! I call you all to unite! This insensitive act must be rectified. Rid the land of any school, any organization calling themselves Spartans. It is humiliating. It cannot be condoned. March on Lansing! March on Washington! March on Athens! Let's right this incredible wrong!

As a former teacher it makes more sense to turn this into a teaching moment. Instead of eliminating these mascots from our midst, never to be heard of again, educate us on who these people were, their culture, where they lived. Write articles about the Native Americans in our area. The Hurons, The Chippewas, the Iroquois Nation. There is so much to learn about them. Why eliminate them? Give us a perspective. Give us understanding. Knowledge is a good thing. We know they were not savages. They had a well-defined, advanced culture. We know their entire future is not in tribal lands full of casinos. Tell us. Educate us. Don't banish them to the world of Hollywood and ignorance. Give us a teaching unit or two – something of substance and fact.

Schools and colleges selected these symbols to show honor, to show respect. It was not out of hate or persecution. Pay homage to the proud and brave.

If one wishes to eliminate a mascot who was truly detrimental and a problem for Native Americans it's not hard to find. What group almost single handedly pushed Native Americans across the country, killing hundreds, and destroying their villages and tribes? The Ypsi Brave did not do this. The symbol most destruction the well being of Native Americans was the Pioneer. Ann Arbor – get rid of the Pioneer!

Get over it!

I guess I have eliminated my chances of being on the Ypsi School's Committee to discuss the Brave.

EMU

Louisiana music group will headline EMU Mardi Gras

Straight from the bayous of Louisiana, **Nathan and the Zydeco Cha Cha's** will rock WEMU's annual Mardi Gras party, Friday, Feb. 4, at the Eastern Michigan University Convocation Center on Hewitt Road, between Washtenaw and Huron River Drive, next to Rynearson Stadium.

Doors open at 7:30 p.m. for dancing to Lagniappe, a group of local musicians fronted by area composer, Chris Benjey. Beads, masks, and other favors will be [illegible] for purchase, on-free parking on-site as well.

A change for 2005 is the introduction of a $20 general admission ticket in addition to the $40 ticket that includes a Louisiana-style dinner. Tables will line special sections both sides of the giant dance floor, reserved for parties who opt for the dinner package, and arena-seating will be open for general admission. Dinner parties of eight, will receive a $5 discount per ticket. Three cash bars will be on site for all ticketholders. The event is 21 and over only and smoke-dinner-dance party only," said Mary Motherwell, WEMU's Marketing & Development Director. "But we've had a lot of people ask about general admission so we decided to try it this year. There is still the opportunity to turn this into a special evening event by purchasing the dinner ticket but for people on a limited budget or those who just want to dance, there is now a second option."

General admission tickets will be available at the door that evening, however dinner office or by phone at 734-487-2282.

More information is available at wemu.org.

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